

The Macartney embassy to China, 1792-94

by Paul Gillingham

Lining the boardroom of Coutts Bank in London's Strand is a striking and unusual wallpaper. Made of mulberry paper, a cross between rice-paper and silk, it depicts scenes of everyday life in Imperial China in the sort of detail that makes it a wallpaper equivalent of a documentary film.

Shopkeepers keep accounts with their abacuses, labourers collect birds' nests for making soup, women adorn a tea house-cure-brothel, barefooted servants wait on their masters, and horses, dogs and children hang about courtyards. Tea is picked, dried, packed and sold and the stages of silk production are shown, from collecting cocoons off mulberry trees, to spinning and weaving.

Such is the wallpaper's importance to the bank that it has survived being moved twice since it was first hung nearly two hundred years ago. In 1978 it was found to be so firmly glued on that the walls were dismantled and rebuilt as part of the modern bank - just to save the wallpaper.

The wallpaper was a present to the bank's director, Thomas Coutts, from one of his customers, Lord Macartney of Lissamore, who had recently returned to England, in 1794, after a two-year expedition to China. He had seen the paper on the walls of a palace where he and his entourage had stayed in Peking, the home of a Collector of Customs who was in jail awaiting execution for misappropriating the profits of European trade ! It was because of people like the Collector of Customs that the Embassy set off for China in the first place. Trade between Britain and China had been expanding fast throughout the eighteenth century, but not fast enough to satisfy all the merchants involved in it. There was an insatiable desire for things Chinese in Britain, especially China tea, porcelain and silk.

As the directors of the East India Company, which held a monopoly on trade with India and China, grew prosperous on the huge profits to be made, there were nevertheless frustrations at the rigid controls imposed on the one port into China which was open to overseas trade, Canton. Foreigners were allowed to stay there only during a five-month trading season, and then only in 'factories' which served as warehouse, office and home - in a foreign ghetto outside the main Chinese city. Women, both local and European, were forbidden, as were Chinese servants and sedan-chair bearers, and any Chinese caught teaching the language to a European could face the death penalty.

Moreover, profits were hit by the graft and corruption built into a system dominated by a guild of Chinese merchants known as the Hong or Cohong and the Collector of Customs himself, the all-powerful Hoppo, one of whom owned the palace that provided the Coutts Bank wallpaper.

Thus it was with a view to liberalising the system and opening up trade with China that George III despatched an embassy to the Imperial Court in Peking in 1792 under one of his most experienced ambassadors, Lord George Macartney. The fifty-five year old Irishman had earlier made a name for himself by charming Catherine the Great and performing sterling work as secretary for Ireland, governor-general of British West Indies. and governor of Madras.

Lord Macartney's was not the first European embassy to China, but it was certainly the largest. The three ships to set sail from Spithead on September 26th, 1792, carried 700 men including diplomats, scholars, botanists, scientists, painters, musicians, technicians, soldiers, servants and sailors. Also on board were two Chinese interpreters, priests from the Collegium Sinicum in Naples, who spoke no English, but passable Latin.

Because none of the adult members of the embassy spoke Chinese, communication was to prove a major problem during the expedition. English was first translated into Latin and then into Chinese, and vice versa, a cumbersome process which left much room for misunderstanding.

Only one Briton of the 700 who set sail could read and write Chinese, and that was a boy of twelve, Macartney's page and the son of his second-in-command, Sir George Staunton. Young Thomas Staunton, who was to play a key part in Sino-British relations for the next fifty years, was a precocious child who could recite a page of The Times after one reading and spoke Latin, Greek, French and German. He learnt his Chinese from the two priests during the ten-month voyage and was later to prove useful in translating some of the key documents Macartney sent to the emperor, including his views on the kowtow.

Aboard the inevitably slow boats to China - the voyage took ten months and went via Rio de Janeiro, Tristan da Cunha, Java and Vietnam - Macartney and his entourage had ample opportunity to reflect on what they might see and experience when they got there. Chinoiserie and 'things Chinese' had been all the rage in Europe for much of the eighteenth century and there was a tendency to idealise China, largely as a result of the writings of European Jesuits who had access to the Peking court. English country estates were landscaped with Chinese gardens, complete with marble pagodas; wall tapestries bore Chinese motifs, and even the Queen of England wore Chinese-style clothes. Philosophers were impressed by the idea of Confucianism,

which seemed to hold the key to ideal government and a harmonious social order based on respect for age and authority.

But by the end of the century the love affair with the idea of China was beginning to pall. Louis-Sebastien Mercier wrote: 'What Wretched luxuries these Chinese porcelains are! With a touch of its paw, a cat can do more damage than the plunder of twenty acres of land'. Montesquieu was much more devastating in his critique of Chinese government: 'China is a despotic state whose principle is fear', he wrote. 'The stick governs China'.

Apart from the diplomatic and commercial aims of the embassy, there was a powerful need to explore the real China, to separate myth from reality. This was, after all, the age of scientific enquiry when everything under the sun was being weighed, measured and assessed. Sir Joseph Banks who accompanied Captain Cook to the South Seas and was establishing the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, gave full instructions to Macartney on what specimens to collect. Both he and Staunton were happy to oblige, being enthusiastic amateur botanists themselves.

On July 20th, 1793, the embassy eventually reached Dengzhou, a city of first rank in the province of Shantung. From there they were to transfer to junks for the journey up-river, stopping briefly at Tientsin, and then marching overland to Peking.

After such a long voyage, first reactions to China were ecstatic. 'O brave new world', Macartney wrote, quoting Shakespeare in his journal. Then, more matter-of-factly, 'great numbers of houses... built of mud and thatched, a good deal resembling the cottages near Christchurch in Hampshire'.

Shortly after arriving, he received a letter from the emperor extending a warm welcome to him and the 'others of England, country of the red hairs' with a promise to replenish their much-depleted stores. Within days, a consignment of 20 bullocks, 120 sheep, 120 hogs, 100 chickens, 100 ducks, 10 chests of tea, 160 bags of flour, 14 boxes of tartar bread and 2,000 melons was lined up on the quayside ready to be loaded on board.

But apart from the significance of having travelled from the other end of the world, the Chinese regarded the embassy as little different from the regular tribute-bearing missions they received from vassal states bordering China, like Burma, Vietnam, Korea and Tibet. As the Chinese script on the yellow pennants fluttering above the junks declared: 'The English Ambassador bringing tribute to the Emperor of China'.

Macartney, however, had no intention of accepting the status of tributebearer on the same level as Burma. His aim was to become accredited as an ambassador on equal terms with China, in the European diplomatic tradition of mutual recognition between sovereign states. True, his ships bore gifts for the Chinese emperor and his entourage, but they were intended as presents and not as 'tribute' in the Chinese sense.

Although a basic principle of Chinese good manners is to understate the value of a gift in order not to humiliate the recipient, Macartney did the opposite. It would not, he wrote in the catalogue listing the presents:

...be becoming to offer trifles of momentary curiosity, but little use. His Britannic Majesty has been, therefore, careful to select only such articles as might denote the progress of science, and of the arts in Europe.

Macartney was hoping to impress the emperor with British ingenuity and doubtless win orders for British goods.

The piece de resistance among the presents was a planetarium which, with the aid of complicated gears, showed the movement of the heavens. Also crated up were telescopes, clocks, guns, cannon, Wedgwood china, two carriages, a diving bell used to repair Ramsgate harbour and a newly-invented hot-air balloon.

There were also paintings of people and places, including portraits of George III and Queen Caroline, which later caused a stir among mandarins who thought of portraiture only in terms of 'ancestral portraits' of the dead. A Reynolds portrait of the Duke of Bedford, painted when he was a child was also seen as rather odd. How, the mandarins asked could a mere boy be a member of the House of Lords when they had to study for years and pass tough exams to achieve a similar rank?

The cultural differences between East and West were especially marked when it came to the kowtow. To the Chinese, the act of self-abasement in the form of kneeling three times and 'knocking' the head on the floor nine times was a vital element in court ritual. Its significance went far deeper than merely showing respect, as a deep bow or curtsy might indicate in the West. The kowtow was an acknowledgement of the rights and obligations owed to a higher by a lower power. In Chinese eyes the emperor was the intermediary between heaven and earth, a lynch-pin in the preservation of universal order against the forces of chaos, both human and divine. He was, after all, the 'Son of Heaven' and brooked no human equal.

But for Macartney, dropping down on both knees was reserved for begging for mercy, praying to God and proposing marriage. To kowtow to the Emperor of China was an act of abject humiliation which he, as the emissary of an equally proud nation, was simply not prepared to do.

The emperor's mandarins did all they could to persuade the English to change their minds. Zhengrui, Wang and Qiao, who escorted the embassy to Peking, offered to give lessons in kowtowing. They advised the English to replace their tight court breeches, knee buckles and garters in favour of the loose Chinese-style garments that made kowtowing so much easier.

But Macartney remained adamant. How could he make an obeisance before the emperor which he would never perform before his own king? The only terms under which he might agree were if the emperor's emissaries agreed to kowtow before the portrait of King George, which, for the Chinese, was impossible. The furthest he would go was to drop on one knee and kiss the emperor's hand, which was how he greeted his own sovereign. Eventually, the Chinese agreed that Macartney could do as he would at home, though they drew the line at hand-kissing. The concession was granted on the grounds that these were, after all, distant barbarians who could not be expected to understand the real significance of the kowtow anyway.

On August 21st, the embassy eventually reached Peking. Macartney, the Stauntons and the Chinese interpreter entered the city at the Western Gate, carried aloft in palanquins ahead of a procession of 90 wagons, 40 handcarts, 200 horses and nearly 3,000 men. By now, the members of the embassy - unwashed, dishevelled and suffering from lack of sleep and mosquito bites - were hardly a prepossessing sight. According to Macartney's valet, Aeneas Anderson, the Chinese crowds burst into laughter when they saw them. The embassy bore 'greater resemblance to the sight provided by the removal of paupers to their parishes in England than the expected dignity of the representative of a great and powerful monarch', he lamented.

They were given accommodation in the only building in Peking large enough to accommodate the whole embassy, the Palace of Eleven Courtyards with the wallpaper which now graces the boardroom of Coutts Bank. This was to be a short stay, as the imperial audience was to take place not in Peking's Forbidden City, but in the emperor's summer residence 120 miles to the north, at Jehol in Manchuria.

On September 2nd, 1793, the party set out along the Imperial Way. In Peking they had left behind a team to set up the display of the 'presents' and make arrangements for transforming the Palace of Eleven Courtyards into the British embassy. This was an especially bitter blow to the artist William Alexander - and to posterity - because he knew he was losing the opportunity of painting the most dramatic events of the whole expedition.

The Imperial Way was a superbly made road of compacted sand and clay, and travelling along with the young Staunton in his own carriage, 'the first piece of Long Acre machinery that ever rattled up the road to Jehol', Macartney could imagine he was back in England.

But he was soon left in no doubt that this was China, not Surrey, by the Great Wall which loomed ahead of them. 'The most stupendous work of human hands', wrote Macartney, who ordered his men to measure every possible dimension, except of course its 4,000 mile length. As they prepared to leave, some were seen pocketing fragments of the Wall, no doubt to sell to antiquity dealers' back home.

Beyond the Great Wall they were in the land of Tartary - or Manchuria - a barren landscape of mountains and remote valleys. Rising above the plains into cooler air, they approached the emperor's summer retreat at Jehol.

The Emperor Qianlong had been watching the embassy's arrival, unseen, from a hilltop pergola. A remarkably clear-eyed man of benign countenance, he wore his eighty-three years well. Staunton later described him as 'so hale and vigorous that he scarcely appeared to have existed as many years, fifty-seven, as in fact he had governed the empire'. That empire had grown substantially during Qianlong's reign, the population having doubled, along with the area over which it held sway. His energy was prodigious, not least in being able to handle an extensive harem and the whims of the notorious 'perfumed muslim' Xiangfei, his consort. As a young man Qianlong had fallen passionately in love with his father's concubine, Machia, and in his sixties the passion was transferred to a male lover, Heshen, Machia's supposed reincarnation. As a result Heshen enjoyed rapid promotion, becoming the emperor's 'Grand Colao' or chief minister. But he was no friend of the embassy and did much to engineer its failure.

In contemplating the audience he was about to give to the English, Qianlong was highly ambivalent. On the one hand he was flattered by their visit. But, as imperial archives show, he had become increasingly annoyed by what he saw as English bad manners, especially over the kowtow. 'The more magnanimous we are towards them, the more conceited they become,' he wrote. He was especially angered by a letter from the king suggesting China would benefit from English progress and that Qianlong should consider George III his 'friend and brother'. As far as Qianlong was concerned, to imply that China needed anything or that a barbarian could be the equal of the Son of Heaven was clearly preposterous.

On Saturday, September 14th, the big day arrived. After setting off at 3am and getting caught up in roaming bands of pigs, cattle and dogs in the darkness, they eventually reached the Garden of Ten Thousand Trees, where Qianlong was to receive them. Approaching a large compound of ceremonial Mongolian tents - or yurts - they could see by the light of paper lanterns that they

were in the presence of the entire imperial court. All the Tartar princes were there, plus viceroys, district and city governors and 5-600 mandarins of varying ranks, together with their servants. In addition, there were ambassadors from tributary states, soldiers, balladeers and musicians, all expectantly awaiting the arrival of the Khan of Khans, his arrival perfectly stage-managed to coincide with the rising of the sun.

They waited three hours. Then, at 7am, as the sun flooded the great park, the emperor arrived, carried in an open chair by sixteen men dressed in gold, followed by his ministers and chief mandarins. As he passed the lines of courtiers, everyone present fell to their knees, sweeping their heads to the ground in the kowtow, except for the British, who dropped to one knee, heads bowed. The emperor entered the largest, most elaborate yurt, followed by the vassals and four members of the British embassy; Macartney, Staunton senior, young Staunton and the Chinese translator. Once inside, they saw that Qianlong was now seated on a raised dais. The nine prostrations were performed again by all present, except the British.

Macartney, followed by Staunton senior, stepped up on to the dais. He handed a pair of enamelled watches to Qianlong, together with a letter from George III in a gilt box. Staunton gave the emperor two airguns. In return, Qianlong presented the two men with a ceremonial jade sceptre each and one in white agate for the king.

Wearying of the long-winded translation provided by Li, the emperor asked if any of the British could speak Chinese. The young Staunton was ushered forward, man and boy conversed briefly and Qianlong presented the twelve-year-old with a yellow silk purse for areca nuts, which had been hanging by his side.

Although the meeting at Jehol had been the high point of the embassy's visit to China, Macartney had no more idea than when he started out whether the British requests would be granted. The answer, in the form of two edicts from Qianlong to George III, came as a shock. There was to be no British ambassador to China and China had no need of British goods. 'As your ambassador can see for himself', Qianlong wrote, 'we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures'.

In the second edict, Qianlong rejected Britain's six proposals for opening up China to British trade. 'Do not say that you were not warned in due time', he concluded. 'Tremblingly obey and show no negligence!' Imperial records show that Qianlong had decided on rejection well before the embassy set foot in China.

Three months later, after a journey across China by land, river and canal, Macartney and his entourage finally rejoined their ships at Canton and set sail for home on January 8th, 1794.

The embassy had been a diplomatic failure, but the long-term effects were profound. Within five years of Macartney's return, six books were published by members of the expedition, all of them best-sellers. Combined with the gossip circulating in England's stately homes and London's salons, they dispelled any romantic notions the West had of China. The celestial empire was now revealed, warts and all.

Macartney chose not to publish his own detailed journal, doubtless for diplomatic reasons. He had concluded that the Chinese were 'barbarians' and the government a 'tyranny of a handful of Tartars over more than three hundred millions of Chinese'. China was like 'an old, crazy, first rate man-of-war' which over-awed its neighbours by its bulk and size but would flounder under the command of a weak leader.

Staunton and John Barrow wrote the semi-official accounts, but it was the populist books by Macartney's valet, Aeneas Anderson, and the soldier, Samuel Holmes, that caught the public imagination. Tales of Chinese peasants eating the fleas they picked off their clothes and defecating in public were far removed from the earlier, idealised, Jesuit versions of China. 'There is not a water-closet, nor a decent place of retirement in all China', despaired Anderson. His phrase - 'We entered Peking like paupers; we remained in it like prisoners; and we quitted it like vagrants'-- stood out as a reminder of the humiliation the embassy had suffered, which, by implication, would one day need to be avenged.

Neither Macartney himself nor any of the books on the embassy advocated using force against China. Yet within fifty years Lord Palmerston had launched the first Opium War against her, extracting by gunboat diplomacy what Macartney had failed to achieve by more peaceful means. Ironically, the leading politician to advocate war against China in the Commons in 1840 was the fifty-nine-year old Sir George Thomas Staunton, that same youth who had conversed with the Emperor Qianlong years before at Jehol.

It is sometimes argued that China missed a golden opportunity and that the history of the country might have been radically different if Qianlong, like Japan's Meiji emperor later, had adopted European techniques of production. But the China of the 1790s was very different from the Japan of the 1860s and China was neither able nor willing to adapt to Western industrialism. Besides, one might ask, what was the relevance of the planetarium - Macartney's great showpiece 'present' - to modern industrialism?

How significant was Macartney's failure to kowtow? Did it cause the failure of the embassy as some, especially the Jesuits in China at the time, believed? The Chinese records of the period significantly make no mention of the kowtow at all. Possibly the embassy might have stayed longer in China and received more courtesies had Macartney agreed to kowtow, but maybe not. Either way, willingness to kowtow did not guarantee success, as a Dutch envoy later discovered. He was treated with disdain after losing face in public when he kowtowed before the emperor so low that his wig fell off!

The Collision of Two Civilisations, by the French historian and former Gaullist diplomat, Alain Peyrefitte, describes the encounter of 1792-94 as 'a collision of two planets ... one celestial and lunar; the other with its feet firmly on the ground - mercantile, scientific and industrial.' For him it is a striking instance of the clash between a dynamic, advanced society and a traditional and unchanging one. Although the book is superbly researched and written, the underlying thesis surely represents a nineteenth century Eurocentric view, which minimises the dynamic, changing aspects of China and the conservatism of much of Britain.

Does the Macartney embassy have a relevance now, 200 years on? On the face of it, yes. China is today an ideological state ruled with an iron hand by an octagenarian. The forces of traditionalism remain strong, Westerners are confined to 'special economic zones' and the capitalist world is knocking hard to enter. Tea, the drink which gave the impetus to eighteenth-century attempts to open up Chinese markets has its modern day equivalent in Coca-Cola. Interestingly, some of the language used recently in connection with Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten's face-off with Beijing over democratic reforms in the colony, echoes 1793. One Hong Kong official praised Britain for standing firm against China over the reforms and refusing to 'tremble and obey', and Britain and Hong Kong are urged by the popular press not to 'kowtow' to Beijing, which must be treated 'like any other country'.

Perhaps it is true that history can repeat itself, but 1793 is not 1993. Qianlong is no more Deng Xiao Ping than George III is John Major or Macartney Chris Patten. What the Macartney embassy offers us is, in the words of Professor Peter Marshall of London University, 'the beam of a searchlight', a fascinating glimpse at the preconceptions two great civilisations had of each other at a particular time in a certain place. No more nor less than that. But it is a thumping good story!

FOR FURTHER READING:

Sir George Leonard Staunton, *An Authentic Account of an Embassy from the King of Great Britain to the Emperor of China* (J. Nicol, 1797); William Alexander, *Picturesque Representations of the Dress and Manners of the Chinese* (John Murray, 1805); Aeneas

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